

# [William shakespeare’s heroines, and determine if his](https://assignbuster.com/william-shakespeares-heroines-and-determine-if-his/)

William Shakespeare’sPortrayal of Women: Was Shakespeare a Feminist?  William Shakespeare’s representation of women, and the waysin which his female roles are interpreted and enacted, are frequently discussedtopics of scholarly interest. Even though Shakespeare never really had a womanas the main center of his plays, Shakespeare’s heroines encompass a wide rangeof characterizations and personality types, from the uncompromising franknessof Cordelia in King Lear, the quickwit of Kate in Taming of the Shrewand of Beatrice in Much Ado about Nothing, and the intelligence of Portia in the Merchantof Venice. Within this gallery of female characters, critics notesimilarities, especially among Shakespeare’s young women characters, whocommonly display great intelligence, vitality, and a strong sense of personalindependence. These qualities have led some critics to herald Shakespeare as aninnovator who departed sharply from stereotyped characterizations of women thatwere common in other literature during his time period.

Contrastingly, othercommentators note that even Shakespeare’s most favorably portrayed women, suchas Cordelia, Beatrice, Kate and Portia, possess characters that are tempered bynegative qualities; all the while suggesting that the women’s prominent negativequalities indicate that Shakespeare was not free of misogynistic tendenciesthat were deeply-rooted in the culture of his country and era. This paper will begthe question – Is William Shakespeare considered to be a feminist? The goal ofthis paper is to evaluate the language used in order to describe some ofShakespeare’s heroines, and determine if his portrayal of women was an extremelyearly wave of feminism, or if Shakespeare was simply a product of his time. According to Jill Ehnenn, author of, “ An Attractive DramaticExhibition? Female Friendship, Shakespeare’s Women, and the Female..”, Shakespeare’swomen characters “ testify to his genius as a playwright because they are drawnwith neither anger nor condescension towards women as a whole.

In personality, the women characters are distinctly different and vary in personality traits. Whilesome of the characters are warm, delightful, friendly; others cold, aloof, andscornful. Some speak with confidence; others with diffidence. They range in agefrom the youthful, joyous Juliet of Romeo& Juliet to the wizened, bitter Margaret of Anjou in King Henry VI” (Ehnenn 315).  In retrospect, most of Shakespeare womencharacters most have a caveat; they grow and develop during the course of adrama, which allows their actions to form a realistic confrontation with lifeas they learn the meaning of self-sovereignty and independence for a woman in anextremely patriarchal society. While Shakespeare portrayed the stereotypicalrepresentations of women in the Renaissance society through his immortal plays, he too, challenged and modified these representations by depicting women ascapable of defying social norms and notions.

According to Sarah Beckwith, author of “ Are There any Women in Shakespeare’s Plays? Fiction, Representation, and Reality in Feminist Criticism” “ Shakespeare’s time, England was ahighly patriarchal society. In this light, women are considered physically andemotionally weaker than men. They are bound to subject to their malecounterparts as wives or daughters. According to women were expected to assumea more passive role.

Shakespeare depicts this kind of thinking by a scene inRomeo and Juliet where Samson, one of Capulet’s servants, remarks: “ Andtherefore women, being the weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall”. Thisline shows male dominance and female repression which caused them to be” thrust” by men. In line with society’s view that women are weaker vessels, they are expected to be submissive, chaste and fine in manners. Bianca inTaming of the Shrew is an ideal woman in this men-dominated society, beyond herbeauty and grace she was described as “ a maid of mild behavior and sobriety” (Beckwith252). Beckwith continues her argument bypointing out that women in Shakespeare’s plays who conform to a patriarchalcompliant image are favored and recognized. Furthermore, Shakespeare emphasizedthe time period’s misogynistic views on women when Hamlet exclaimed: “ Frailty, thy name is woman!”.

Ironically, while thesociety disparages women for being frail in physique and intellect, it alsodemands them to conform such stereotype. Shakespeare seems to condemn a commontraditionalist view on women by creating strong characters out of his femaleprotagonists. For example, at some point in these women’s stories, they wentagainst the social norm and defied their male protectors. Take for exampleHermia from A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Despite the possibility of losing her life or being sent to the nunnery, shestill refused to obey her father’s will. Since the family is dominated by themales, it is but unusual for a daughter to defy her father.

Males in the familybelieve that their opinion is the only one that matters. This common themes ofdefiance of the male head of household can be seen in Juliet and her relationshipwith her father, Lord Capulet, when he expressed such confidence when heassured Juliet’s suitor, Paris, of Juliet’s love. Notwithstanding the powerthat males possess, Shakespeare’s women were able to manifest femaleemancipation and resistance to established standards of conduct: for example, Jessica, in Merchant of Venice, eloped withLorenzo, thus leaving her father, Shylock, behind. In addition, Shakespearechallenged the idea that women are unintelligent.

He modified the notion ofwomen being intellectually inferior by creating witty the characters such asKate and Portia. In the Merchant ofVenice, Portia exhibits her intellectual prowess by singlehandedly savingAntonio’s life from Shylocks bond. She exhibited her brightness by ironicallyusing the quality of mercy as an argument: “ The quality of mercy is notstrain’d/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath: itis twice bless’d ;/It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. (IV.

I) Hence, because of Portia’s extraordinary intellect, Shylock surrendered and Antoniowas freed from the bond. “ I take this offer then: pay the bond thrice/ And letthe Christian go” (IV. I). Portia’s character is one that is different becauseshe exudes intellect and knowledge in a way that makes her seem like anempowered woman. She dresses up as a man in order to save her beloved’s bestfriend and thus shows the versatility for Shakespeare and his writings tocreate a complex character that completely defies the societal norms at thetime. Portia in the Merchant of Veniceis undoubtedly a character that can be classified as a feminist in modernstandards.

Conclusively, Shakespeare was able to show the differentfacets of women during his time. His female protagonists are not the insipidand uneducated type’s common in a patriarchal society, but instead areinteresting, witty and intelligent. It’s not therefore surprising thatShakespeare’s plays are revered up to this moment.

Remarkable, indeed, thatamidst a society where women are not supposed to speak and be heard, Shakespeare gave them voice